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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the research that examines the content of television, especially in its portrayal of women. Studies reporting on the viewing habits of the general population and particularly children are summarized. Also recounted is research that explores the relationship between sex role development in children and the presentation of sex roles on television. This research identifies television as a socializing agent that reinforces traditional sexist stereotypes and, it is said, has a definite impact on children's sex role perception and behavior. The findings from studies that analyzed both programming for children and adults are presented. These research efforts, the paper states, show that neither the programs, nor the commercials designed for both audiences provide suitable models or messages about sex roles for youngsters growing up in this culture. (Author/APM)

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IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT WOMEN ARE LIKE

JUST TURN ON YOUR TUBE

by Ilona Henderson

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IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT WOMEN ARE LIKE JUST TURN ON YOUR TUBE

Ilona Henderson, Project Associate
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College, Columbia University, 1978.

The media--television, films, radio, records, newspapers, magazines, comics, etc.--shape our senses. They are the tools of the culture that transmit messages to us in neat little packages that we buy. They tell us how we are to feel about ourselves and others. To a large extent media are responsible for both shaping and reinforcing the attitudes that we hold. Some media are more pervasive than others by virtue of their sheer accessibility. Television, for instance, has the greatest potential since it finds its way into 98% of the nation's homes (R.M. Liebert, 1977, p. 7).

With a touch of the button a flood of messages pour out too freely. Never is there a reduction in the flow. Not only do the programs assault us but the advertisements which regularly and predictably interrupt them continue to reinforce the stereotypes already presented.

It is the aim of this paper to review the research that examines the content of one of the major agents of socialization, namely, television. Television has become "the single most important source of news, entertainment and leisure time activity in the United States" (R.M. Liebert, 1977, p.7). As such it has managed to create and maintain a stereotype of women which not even the last decade of women's liberation has been able to seriously alter.

Some Realities About Television

It is healthy to think of advertisements as the sponsors of the programs that we choose to see on the screen. However, quite a different set of facts exists as to the relationship between program, commercial, and viewer. Since 85% of all broadcast hours is commercial television we should be clear of this relationship. We are the products. We are what the programs deliver to the advertisers. Should those products fail to sell, the program, no matter how

much it is viewed and enjoyed, is cancelled. Such was the case with Playhouse 90 whose sponsors were berated for interrupting serious drama (D. E. Liebert, 1977, p. 69). In fact, with the exception of Saturday morning programming which is directed toward young children, general programming is directed toward an audience of 18 to 49 year-olds. This happens to be the largest consumer audience (Liebert, Neale & Davidson, 1973, p. 15). This audience receives low quality programming that generally distorts reality. Every effort is made to hold the viewer's attention long enough to bring him/her to the real business of television - the commercials. Television advertising has grown from a 300 million dollar business in 1952 to a six billion dollar business in 1976 (D.E. Liebert, 1977, p. 69).

Think about it. During prime-time programming the viewer is assualted by 16 commercials per hours, and children get no fewer than twenty (D.E. Liebert, 1977, p. 70). Occasional exposure to this medium would not be so threatening but such is not the case. By the time the average American graduates from high school he/she will have been exposed to over 350,000 television commercials (D.E. Liebert, p.70) and will "have spent more time in front of a tube than in the classroom" (Harvey, 1977, p. 89).

Some Realities About Children

Some interesting statistics about children's viewing habits may shed some light onto the concern of many about the distortions of reality to which youngsters are exposed. For instance, most children begin to view television at age 2½ (Harvey, 1977, p. 89). Between the ages of 2 and 5 boys and girls consume a weekly average of 23¼ hours of television (Safran, 1977, p. 165). By age 7, 94% are regular viewers. These represent the same years in which 70 to 80% of the intelligence is determined and the period in which sex stereotyping occurs. "By age eight 99% agreement is found among children of both sexes as to which sex does which job, what kind of person a girl or boy should be, and what the role limitations and expectations are" (Women's Advisory Council to KDKA-TV, 1975, p. 2).

Beuf (1974) has shown that sex role perception of children born since the women's movement shows little change. Children are aware of their own sex between 17 months and 3 years. Beuf conducted an experiment in which she asked 37 boys and 26 girls whether they would feel comfortable in a nontraditional role (as measured by pictures depicting men and women in reversed traditional sex roles). She found that:

> Television viewing is related to career choice in a very interesting way. Children who were moderate viewers appeared to exert a wider range of choice in career selection than the heavy viewers. Seventy-six percent of the heavy viewers (compared with 50% of the moderate viewers) selected stereotypical careers. (p. 143)

In another task, the "OK Picture Game," where children were asked whether it is appropriate for a man to feed a baby or prepare a meal, or for a female to repair a phone, Beuf found that in addition to knowing their sex, "preschool children know the social implications and limitations of that sexual definition." She reports that television viewing data show that "the more children see of the world, as it is presented by everyday cultural purveyors, the more likely they are to apply sex stereotypes to careers" (p. 144).

Frueh and McGhee's (1975) research corroborates Beuf's findings. They tested the hypothesis that "the amount of time spent watching television would be significantly related to the strength of traditional sex-role development" (p. 109). To test this they selected 40 boys and girls, ten at each of four grades (K, 2, 4, 6), and divided them into high (25 or more hours) and low (10 or less hours) television watchers. Using the It Scale to measure strength of traditional sex role development they confirmed their hypothesis. They report that "high amounts of television watching are clearly associated with stronger traditional sex-role development...this relationship holds equally true for boys and girls, and it does not change with increasing age" (p. 109).

In the foreword to their book, Positive Images: A Guide to Non-Sexist Films for Young People, Artel and Wengraf (1976) write:

> As we grow up we form self-image and basic values by observing and emulating role models in the social environment. In our electronic age formative reality is also made up of images created by the mass media. This media is controlled by men and is notoriously sexist. Television and film saturate the viewer with their glamorized, yet limiting stereotypes. Such role models restrict both young women's and young men's emotional, intellectual, and physical development. In the media, women are shown as passive, dependent and incompetent while men are competitive, physically violent, and unfeeling. Most children's TV programs and educational media present these same distorted stereotypes. (p. 7)

There is a real conflict. Television is commercially governed and it continues to project women in a light that makes equality between the sexes a hope never to be realized. Television has truly been recognized as an incredibly strong agent of socialization, shaping young children's attitudes of who and how they should be.

Bandura and Walters (1963) have long shown that behavior can be acquired through observation. Television has long since shown that it can provide models, both through program content and commercials, to maintain the desirability of sex-typed behavior. Liebert, Neale and Davidson (1973) warn that as we examine the content of television we should bear in mind that "entertainment fare necessarily does more than merely entertain us and our children; it communicates information about the social structure and it shapes attitudes about ourselves, others, and the world at large" (p. 18).

Sternglanz and Serbin (1976) maintain that both male and female roles are limited. The child over time comes to learn that certain behaviors are more appropriate for one sex than the other. In addition, they find females are generally ignored as they are depicted on television while males are generally rewarded.

Liebert and Poulos (1977), regarding television as the socializing agent that it is, touch upon the vicarious identification which may

result based on the roles typically presented. Following a theoretical discussion of observational learning these authors hold that television teaches that the white American male, "usually young, middle-class and unmarried", is the stereotype of the person permitted to be the aggressor. "Two out of every three women, regardless of race or ethnicity, is married or engaged; employed women are more likely to be depicted as villains than are housewives" (p. 204).

The Women's Advisory Council to KDKA-TV (Pittsburgh) also recognized the centrality of television in the formation of attitudes in young children along this vicarious dimension. They identify the possible dangers of stereotyping based on the models TV provides:

> Television is important as a source of behavior because it brings into the environment a much wider range of models than any individual would experience without it. Very young children are especially susceptible to models supplied by television because they are less able than others to separate fantasy from reality, or to maintain a distance from their immediate perceptions. (1975, p.2)

The latter portion of the above quotation is particularly salient as we look to what it is that the young child sees as <u>real</u> and <u>desirable</u>. Recognize, too, that the young child is soaking up information continuously as he/she tries to determine his/her role. Television becomes an understandably important and necessary source of information, particularly from the child's point of view. He/she is not aware of the distortions. Rather, he/she seeks them out to give himself/herself definition. Harvey (1977) identifies childhood as a time wherein the child learns what "to expect from the world and what the world expects from the child" (p. 89). She recognized that initially these answers are supplied by the parents but as the child grows he seeks additional sources of information:

> ...moving away from the exclusive reliance on parents and family toward peers and the mass media. Television, readily accessible in every home and requiring no skill to use, has become a major factor in the child's socialization.

There seems to be a general consensus that television has a definite impact on the child's sex role perception and behavior. It opens up a series of vicarious experiences for the child to fantasize in but usually, if not always, with very clearly defined sex role stereotypes. As the child measures outcomes he/she learns what is appropriate behavior. The fact that programs and commercials inundate him/her with the same kind of messages seriously limits the child's sex role development. While television flies in the face of reality, the child is hardly in a position to counter all the inconsistencies found on the screen. It is doubtful, therefore, that the youngster believes the real world he/she experiences, when contrasted with the one containing the "varied" screen personalities, is valid.

Some Real World Statistics

Before examining the distorted image of reality that television offers, let us quickly remind ourselves of a few facts about this society, particularly about the role of women in this society.

1. Fifty-four percent of the population is female. After age 15, women consistently outnumber men (R.M. Liebert, 1977, p. 9).

2. Approximately forty percent of the national work force is comprised of women (Sprafkin, 1977, p. 54).

3. The percentage of married women who work was reported at 15% in 1940, 37% in 1967, and is continuing to rise (Franzwa, 1974, p. 104).

4. According to the 1972 Census figures the top three job categories for women are: clerical, 34.5%; service workers, 22.3% and professional and technical workers, 15%. For men, craftsmen and kindred workers constitute 20.5% of the workforce while 18.5% and 14% are operatives and professional and technical workers, respectively, constitute the largest employment categories (Downing, 1974, p. 133).

5. There are as many women in marriages as men. This is obvious since they must be married to each other. Therefore, since there are more women than men, there is a greater percentage of men in marriages than women.

6. This society is comprised of people who span the gamut, from young to old, fat to thin, beautiful to ugly, etc. (Strictly observational.)

7. There are a variety of family situations: two parent families; older siblings; extended families, etc.

Television Distortions

In light of the foregoing analysis of the medium and given the context of the real world, let us now examine the content of the programs and commercials of both child and adult fare. Precisely what are contained in the many messages about sex roles that are fostering traditional attitudes about women. Bear in mind that the way in which attitudes toward social groups are developed involves a two-step process. According to Sprafkin's (1977) description of this theory it operates as follows:

> First, the group has to gain recognition through sheer representation on television. If we see a particular social group very frequently, we presume they are at least a relevant segment of society. A group never (or hardly ever) presented leads us to presume that the group must be insignificant. If a group is represented, our impression is further influenced by the degree of respect the group is given. Respect for a group if shown by social class/occupational roles; it is assigned as well as the personalities the member project. A group seen frequently on TV can still be relegated to an inferior status if its members occupy a low socio-economic class or show undesirable effects. In short, recognition addresses how often a group is represented and respect, how it is portrayed. (p. 54)

If we look to children's programming, principally Saturday morning programs for the major networks and late afternoon for weekday shows on local networks, we find that youngsters are bombarded with sexist attitudes. And unfortunately within a single season they are apt to get the very same message repeated since the networks buys a contract from the producer guaranteeing that each episode be shown "6 times over two year or occasionally 8 times over three years" (Liebert, Neale & Davidson, 1973, p. 15).

Sprafkin (1977) in discussing Saturday morning programs reports that females have a "far more restricted range of occupational roles than do males; females are pretty teenagers in adolescence and housewives in adulthood" (p. 54). Beyond these limitations Sprafkin also notes that women's status is "always defined...in relationship to males" (p. 54).

Sternglanz and Serbin (1976) express concern over the degree to which sex-typing occurs on children's television. They examine both the content, and consequence of male and female images on television. In their content analysis of ten children's programs, both animated and non-animated, they constructed twelve behavioral categories (activity, achievement, construction, dominance, aggression, difference, autonomy, harm avoidance, succorance, nurturance, magic recognition, and self-recognition) along which to measure the treatment of the sexes. Of the 147 characters they reviewed, Sternglanz and Serbin found a low percentage of women to men (1:3). The numbers are consistent with the literature of adult programs as is the role depiction--females are deferent to others and their activity results in no consequence. From their data these researchers conclude that "...sex appropriate models represented to male and female children are strikingly different and convey very different messages about sex appropriate behavior" (p. 237).

Streicher (1974) examines whether the role of females fares any better in the strictly animated programs. She found that many cartoons are <u>all</u> male. Not a single all female cartoon was observed. Furthermore, when females were seen their lines were generally of the "Help! Save me, Underdog! variety" (p. 126). Another observed frequent role model for the female is what Streicher calls the "teachy-peachy" female who gives prosocial messages like "Don't skip school," "Cooperate," or "Make do with what you have" (p.126).

In sum, Streicher offers the following picture of the female image in television cartoons:

> In general, cartoon females were less numerous than males, made fewer appearances, had fewer lines, played fewer "lead roles", were less active, occupied fewer positions of responsibility, were less noisy, and were more preponderantly juvenile than males. Mothers worked only in the house; males did not participate in housework. In many activities in which girls showed some form of skill (e.g., cheerleading) their performance was duplicated by a dog or other pet. (p.127)

It could be argued that these perceptions are the kind made only by an adult and that children do not concentrate on the role differences. Whether it be in or out-of-awareness, youngsters do show preferences for types of programs and it has been documented that these break down along sex lines. Streicher notes that young boys are more likely to mention cartoons as their favorite program which young girls tend to prefer situation comedies (Streicher, p. 128). Thus males are getting a heavy dose of sexism and they seem to enjoy getting it.

More liberated parents might make the argument that they control their children's television viewing and encourage them to watch only non-commercial television. Not much relief is to be found in that choice either for even Sesame Street has done little to improve the image of females:

> For a little girl engaged in her own passionate struggle for self-definition, watching Sesame Street last year - and even this fall - was like taking lessons in invisibility. Each appearance of a female character, in her constricted, stereotyped role was doubly damaging because female characters actually appeared so very rarely. (Bergman, 1972, p. 13)

In fact, Sesame Street, in its attempt to respond to criticism, added to new females, one of whom is a mail-lady, to the show. While this technically increased the ratio of men to women (4:3), the actual air-time prepresentation remained low. Bergman insists that Sesame Street has gone from being "incredibly sexist" to slightly so.

Despite real world statistics, women account for only 1/4 of all television characters, and those very few are found working outside the home

(Mills, 1974, p. 150). As in children's programs, women's status is generally determined in relation to a man. Women are usually personally oriented as opposed to men who are professionally oriented. And when women do work they have little prestige or power, most often they are found in roles subordinate to men (McNeil, 1975, p. 206). It is further shown that when they are cast in roles of prestige or power their personal conflicts, usually romantic, are what the viewer is forced to focus upon.

One rather progressive presentation can be found in the daytime serials, the category one might expect to be most stereotyped. Instead these daytime dramas actually present a far more accurate portrayal of women than do prime-time programs. (Of course, the little minds to be shaped are generally in nursery or school, and therefore, out of danger.) Content analyses reveal that in the "soaps" men and women are on "even footing" (Turow, 1974, p. 139). Here, the percentage is 54 to 46 in favor of men--just the reverse of reality.

Downing (1974) has recorded information on 255 drama characters in the daytime serials. Of the 256, 129 were women and 127 men. Of these, 90% are middle-class. As in prime-time drama women are still younger than the men. If we look at the employment figures of these characters we find distortions for both sexes. In fact, the proportion of female professionals is slightly overrepresented while for male professionals it is grossly exaggerated (at 58%).

Adult Fare

Were children's programs the only material to which our youngsters were exposed such concern over the potential for brainwashing would be lessened. Other activities to which children are exposed might serve as a meaningful balance in their development of attitudes about sex roles. However, such is not the case. Their socialization is continued by the heavy viewing by youngsters of adult fare, both during daytime and prime-time hours. Recall that 25% of the first-graders were still viewing television at 10:30 pm. Besides, having young children exposed to adult

programs might not be so devastating were the content of these programs an improvement over what the child has learned from children's shows. But the models that are provided are not better. The image of women does not change. What they see in adult programs only confirms the images and attitudes developed during the viewing of children's programs.

What is it that youngsters learn from adult entertainment? In most cases, to be sure, adult fare presents as bleak a picture of women as represented in exclusive children's programs. Writing in 1954 and 1953 Head and Smythe, respectively, found that men dominated two-thirds of the roles on television. Twenty years later Gerbner, Tedesco, and Fontes (1975) each documented that the number had risen to seventy-five percent (cited in Seggar, 1975). This is certainly an unexpected response to women's liberation.

Prime-time lags far behind the daytime serials in the portrayal of women in dramatic roles. The focus on women, when they are included, is generally on their romantic involvement. Furthermore, they are viewed as more deferent and nurturing. When women are the center of focus they are most often cast in comic or light roles. Almost 75% of television females are in comedies or similar shows whereas, 50% of the male leads are participating in crime, westerns, or action adventures (Sprafkin, 1977, p. 54). Furthermore, comic treatment almost always seems to be the vehicle used to present non-traditional material such as:

> ...interracial marriages (The Jeffersons), love between the elderly (Doc), problems of single men or women (Mash, One Day at a Time), alternative sexual life styles, e.g. homosexuality, (Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman). (Franzblau, p. 112)

At other times, in serious drama, women and men continue to be viewed in very traditional ways. Men are the aggressor and women are subservient. Beyond this, mixed messages abound. Sprafkin points out that men are more successful with men:

> ...TV gives very different messages to males and females about the desirability of marriage. Marriage is shown as reducing a male's power but enhancing a female's. Only 1/3 of TV males are married compared to 2/3 of TV females. Single men are portrayed as more powerful (i.e., get their way) than married men, whereas, single women on TV are more likely to be victims of violence than are married women. (p. 55)

For men, families seem to be provided by their work. Typical "on-the-job families" include such affiliations as (widower) Lt. Mike Stone and (single) Officer Steve Keller (Streets of San Francisco), Drs. Marcus Welby and Steven Kiley, (Marcus Welby, M.D.), Peggy and Joe Mannix (Mannix), or in man-plus-proteges programs of the Mod Squad, Rookies, or Ironside variety (Goldsen, 1977, p. 37). In the last example cited programs can be recalled where the three young people who work for Ironside do chores for him, eat their meals with him and even address him as "Chief". Finally, the third "family" situation that can be seen regularly is what Goldsen identifies as the "bunch"shows: Mary Tyler Moore, Barney Miller or Open America. Each of these network shows permits the viewer to see the single male exhibit behavior that he would; that is, if he were "strapped" in a marriage and/or family.

All in all, the picture provided by the serious dramas presented on television does little to counter traditional sex roles and stereotyping. While the comedies may offer some hope, they cleverly elicit derision from us toward the characters and situations.

On Commercials

Shifting the focus from program content to commercials aimed at an adult audience, though thoroughly accessible to children, we find the same demeaning of women operative. More clearly than ever can be seen the re-inforcement of sexism.

Of 1241 television commercials that were coded for content by NOW, the follwoing results were reported by Bushby (1975):

37.5% of the ads showed women as men's domestic adjuncts
22.7% demeaned housework
33.9% showed women as dependent on men
24.3% showed women as submissive
16.7% showed women as sex objects
17.1% showed women as unintelligent
42.6% showed women as household functionaries. (p. 108)

It is clear that there is never a reduction in the flow of the sexist message, that woman's place is in the home. Verna's (1975) coding of children's advertisements revealed that women are depicted as housewives 80% of the time. When a woman is shown working outside the home Verna has observed that the occupation is usually stereotypically female: model, stewardess, secretary, maid or teacher (p. 301).

Another study, as reported in the U.S. Congressional Hearing (1977) on advertising during children's programs, revealed that males outnumber females more than 2 to 1. Of a possible 2226 characters coded during one content study, 62% were male. "Further, out of all the spot messages containing human characters, 37.63% had only male characters whereas only 14.52% had only female characters" (pp. 290-1).

Aside from on-screen inclusion females are even less employed to serve as the voice of authority in the device known as "voice-overs". Here, while attending to on-screen activity, an off-screen voice is heard, the purpose of which is to provide authoritarian approval of the product. It has been documented that regardless of the product being sold, 87% of the voice-overs are male while only 6% are female. The remaining 7% of the voice-overs are achieved by use of a chorus (Verna, 1975).

KDKA-TV Women's Advisory Council conducted a content analysis which revealed two important findings in relation to female portrayals in commercials:

1. Men dominate television in all but one area - commercials. And even here they overshadow 87% of all ads by use of the device known as the voice- over.

2. Of the 1037 female product representatives appearing in the commercials monitored, only 16% appeared in jobs.

Dominick and Rauch's (1972) content analysis concentrates on ads appearing during prime-time. They found that women are often seen as decorative (sex objects) or useful, but rarely as professional, or as working wives. Of the 986 ads they coded, they found that women are "7 times more likely to appear in ads for personal hygiene", and unlikely to be found in ads for vehicles or products associated with them (p. 26). They also note that 75% of the women viewed were filmed in either kitchen or bathroom seetings (the figure for men is 56%). Of the females who did hold jobs, they were mostly employed in subservient roles: secretary, stewardess, cook, or domestic (p. 263). Dominick and Rauch assert that female professionals are "conspicuously absent" from commercial television.

Courtney and Whipple (1974) show that while individual content analyses sample different times of the day or year and while the focus may be different, there exists a great deal of consistency in the findings of the various samplings. Furthermore, these researchers hold that advertisers' responses to changes in women's roles has been poor. They conclude that the lag that exists indicates that television commercials may in fact be getting worse.

It seems clear that neither children's programs or adult fare, nor the commercials designed for either audience provide suitable models or messages about sex roles for youngsters growing up in this culture. Despite the efforts, little has been done to significantly alter the content of television.

If there is any validity to the two-step theory of attitude formation then educators owe it to themselves to find ways to counter the effects of the misrepresentation of over half the population. At the same time, we need to consider ways in which to effect a change in the content of this most powerful medium which has found its way into virtually every American household.

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